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ABSTRACT

Twelve online searchers in several reference departments in a major urban university library were interviewed to identify the criteria that are present in successful searches from the searcher's perspective. The study was designed to show that successful searching requires active participation by both the searcher and the patron throughout the search process. More than anything else, the interviews revealed that successful searching and librarian satisfaction mean matching the patron's expectations with those of the librarian. For the librarian, these expectations are that the patron will: be articulate and able to explain the topic in simple statements; be flexible with regard to the fee; accept some interpretations of the topic; and accept the searcher's expertise and familiarity with the computer system. The searchers feel that the patron's expectations of them are that the searcher will: understand the topic statement; know how to use the system and have the necessary technical expertise; do the search as efficiently and inexpensively as possible; explain the search results; and follow through with suggestions on other appropriate reference sources. It is suggested that it would be useful in future studies to ask both searchers and patrons parallel questions about the validity of a given search. A copy of the interview questions used and three references complete the paper. (KM)

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LIBRARIAN SATISFACTION WITH COMPUTER BIBLIOGRAPHIC SEARCHING

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Abstract. Computer searching is a reference service in academic libraries where good communication is essential. Successful computer searches are the result of an active exchange of information that combines subject expertise by the patron and search experience by the searcher. This paper examines the comments from interviews with twelve reference librarian searchers. It identifies their criteria for successful searching as a dynamic process between the searcher and the patron. The value of recognizing this process has implications for training programs and end-user instruction.

Keywords and Phrases. Computer Bibliographic Searching; Computer End-User Training; On-line Searching; Reference Interview Process; Reference Services.

Computer searching is an area whose focus in the library literature has usually been on patron satisfaction with the service. Articles that typify this approach look at the usefulness of search results in terms of recall and precision and how valuable the citations are to the patron. Good examples of such articles are Richard Blood's "Evaluation of Online Searches,"1 Doris Marshall's "To Improve Searching, Check Search Results,"2 and Arleen Somerville's "The Pre-Search Reference Interview - A Step by Step Guide."3

In this paper I look at librarian satisfaction with the search process. I see the search process as having three parts: a pre-search interview, an online session, and a review of the resulting bibliography. Other articles have often looked at review of the bibliography as the quantifiable measure of successful searching. I am interested in the quality of criteria that are present in successful searches from the searcher's perspective. To do this, I interviewed twelve online searchers in several reference departments of a major urban university library. The searchers work in a general reference department, a science library, and a health science library. They have a range of searching experience from one to nine years and represent subject coverage of medicine, education, the social sciences, engineering, business, and the physical sciences. Although twelve interviews may seem a small number for analysis, the searchers have trained at a large number of academic settings, as well as in special, medical, and public libraries. So, they reflect a large background of experience.

I asked the searchers twelve open-ended questions that allowed them to draw from their experience. (A list of the interview questions appears at the end of this paper.) The questions covered topics in the search process, such as patron preparation, the pre-search interview, searcher preparation, and the online session. The questions were prompted by my own experience and expectations as a searcher. I wanted to analyze comments about the search process as a dynamic interaction between the searcher and a patron. My objective was to answer three questions:

1. What criteria did searchers use to define a successful search?

2. What did they expect from the patrons to search satisfactorily?

3. What recommendations could they make for improving the searcher-patron relationship in the search process?

The point of the study is to show that successful searching requires active participation by both the searcher and the patron throughout the search process. The process is a negotiation of expectations, subject expertise, and search experience. The searcher has to trust in the patron's knowledge of the topic; the patron has to trust in the searcher's ability to find appropriate information online. The human component is critical to the study's premise that successful searching is not measured solely by patron satisfaction with the search process. The study is intended to add to a more well-rounded view of computer searching in the library literature.

Searchers want patrons to be interested in the search process and expect them to provide subject expertise in the preparation of the search strategy. Searchers appreciate patrons who will work with them, but who do not challenge their authority. Individual searchers spoke of their wish to be respected for their expertise in searching as a reference skill. Two searchers mentioned that they dislike intrusive patrons who tell the searchers how to perform the mechanics of a given search. This was a point echoed by the librarians who search without patrons present and prefer it that way. They, however, go through the pre-search interview in considerable detail with their patrons. The image that comes to mind is one of the patron playing Dr. Watson to the searcher's Sherlock Holmes in a common investigation of information.

More than anything else the interviews revealed that successful searching and librarian satisfaction mean matching the patron's expectations with the librarian's expectations. For the librarian, these expectations are: that the patron will know something about the topic, that the patron will be articulate and able to explain the topic in simple statements, that the patron will be flexible with regard to the fee, within a given range, that the patron will not be narrow-minded about the results and will accept

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some interpretation of the topic, and that the patron will accept the searcher's familiarity with the computer system and advice on an appropriate database, appropriate search strategy, and the amount of retrievable information available.

The searchers feel that the patron's expectations of them are: that the searcher will understand the topic statement and not misinterpret it, that the searcher will know how to use the system and have technical expertise, that the searcher will do the search as efficiently and inexpensively as possible, that the searcher will explain the search results and any reasons for a small bibliography, that the searcher will follow through with suggestions and advice on other appropriate reference sources, such as indexes, bibliographies, and referrals to collections.

A successful search is defined as matching the expectations already mentioned. It is crucial that there be some verbal exchange between the searcher and the patron in the search's preliminary stages so that they agree on the major points. After that communication the patron's presence becomes an option for some searchers. It is important to have the patron around before and after the search for preparation and feedback, but is not always necessary during the search. Some searchers like to have the patron present during the online session so that the patron can see any problems or limitations that may develop. If the patron is not present, the searchers emphasized the importance of discussing the topic in detail in a pre-search interview.

The searchers stressed a commitment to providing a high-quality service to the patrons. A search is not simply a mechanical manipulation of data but a creative process involving expertise and innovative thinking. In one case, a searcher is involved in information retrieval for patient care by the medical staff. The program, called LATCH for Literature Attached to Chart, requires the searcher to conduct searches in a very short time period and to be responsible for document delivery. The searcher takes the work very seriously and checks with the medical staff after each search to evaluate the information, its usefulness, and relevancy. This process clearly takes the searcher-patron contact beyond the traditional reference setting and shows the critical importance of having a common understanding of teamwork in the search process.

The librarians voiced a strong interest in knowing that their searches provide information that is useful and used by the patron. Post-search feedback is not common and is a source of frustration for the searchers. They appreciate both negative and positive comments: if negative, the searchers could redo the search and correct the problems in its strategy; if positive, the comments would bring confidence and a reinforcement of their ability.

It was considered important to deal directly with the patron, not a second party such as a friend or secretary. Other people do not know in sufficient detail what the patron wants. Dealing with people besides the patron wastes the searcher's time and may mean duplication of effort.

Individual searchers had different approaches to the amount of information that they would give the patrons during the pre-search interview and while online. The searchers would usually explain the mechanics of searching and give information on vendor programs for individual use if the patron was interested, but this varied by librarian. Some searchers never explain technical information unless there is a problem with the system or the search strategy. The searchers at the medical center who usually work without the patron present have a formal end-user training program to handle interest by the medical staff. Librarians who regularly search with the patron present will explain the online process if its helps in the formation of the search strategy. These searchers almost always go over the thesauri and rotated-term indexes with the patron in a team effort; they explain the technical details as needed in each search.

I asked the searchers to describe their ideal search environment and to describe a particularly good search and a particularly bad search based on their experience. They could comment on any aspect of the search process for the first question. They could draw from any search or a combination of searches in their experience for the second question.

For the ideal environment, the searchers mentioned the type of room (that it be well-lit, private, quiet), type of equipment (that there be a highspeed printer of good quality), time allowed for the search (one hour or longer with gaps between searches to accommodate lengthy online sessions), cost (partial or complete subsidy by the library for all searches), and type of patron. Searchers like patrons to be open-minded about the limits of searching, to be attentive during the online session, and willing to work within a given price range.

In the actual search environment searchers distinguish between undergraduates and graduate students but not between lower and upper division undergraduate students. Generally, graduate students are thought to have more realistic expectations of how the search can help them. They are more sophisticated library users who know how to integrate search information with other research techniques. They are genuinely interested in their topics, often doing research for a thesis or dissertation. They understand what vocabulary terms the searcher needs to do the search and come prepared to explain their topics, subject terms, and the names of authorities writing in that area. They have usually gone through the appropriate printed indexes prior to the search. After the search they request occasional follow-up searches that build on some aspect of

the original search.

The searchers cited patron contact as a major reason for good and bad searches. For the most part, librarians did not mention bad results but disappointment by the patron as the source of a bad search. There were occasional glitches with the computer system, but mishaps usually occurred when there was a misunderstanding by patrons about cost, the anticipated size of the bibliography, and the availability of the material. Some patrons thought that the search would provide the full text of articles or that it was possible to search several databases simultaneously. Sometimes patrons did not understand the end product. Searchers pointed out the lack of understanding by patrons about the searcher's information needs; topics were either too broad, too narrow, or too vague. Some patrons were unhappy with a low recall and blamed the searcher if there was not much information on their topic in the computer system. Bad searches often happened when there were unrealistic expectations by the patrons that could not be matched by the system. Other contributing factors were patrons who did not understand the dynamics of the search as an interactive process, did not get involved in the online session, or did not show any interest in the results.

Good searches were when the searcher was able to bring something extra to the search and surpassed the patron's expectations. There was good human interaction and the searcher felt challenged by the topic and its access points in the system. Searchers enjoyed trying new databases and creating search strategies that were not routine concept combinations. In a good search, the patron showed enthusiasm and knowledge of the topic, participated actively in the online session, and reported on the usefulness and quality of the bibliography after the search. The searcher was able to bring more to the search than the patron had anticipated or thought possible, and the patron appreciated the extra effort.

The point of this paper has been to demonstrate that computer searching is an interactive human process as well as a system process. The comments that the searchers made during the interviews can be transformed into recommendations for improving the searcher-patron relationship. Searchers want patrons to participate in the search process and to work with the searcher as a team. Good searching means linking the patron's expectations with the searcher's experience. The satisfaction of both depends on a common understanding of the elements that have been mentioned. Understanding and building on the human value of the search process is critical to providing a computer search service as valuable to the patron as any other area of reference work. It makes sense that a good search that meets a searcher's criteria for excellence will also meet a patron's criteria since they are worked out during the course of the search. The satisfaction of the searcher and the patron are interdependent. A responsible librarian will not feel good about a search if the patron does not; likewise, a searcher will feel pleased when the search yields more than the patron expected. The psychological benefits affect both people. The searcher is able to recognize how the quality of the search helped the patron in a way not possible through the printed sources. This advantage is one of the justifications for offering a computer search service in a reference setting.

It would be useful in future studies to ask both searchers and patrons parallel questions about the quality of a given search. This study shows the validity of considering the search process, not just the search results, when evaluating a computer search service. It also highlights the need to consider searcher satisfaction, as well as patron satisfaction, with that process.

Sample Interview with Online Searchers

Searcher's Name:

Number of Years of Search Experience:

Range of Databases Used:

Subject Areas Usually Searched:

Questions:

1. How important is previous research by the patron on the topic to be searched?

2. Does the patron talk about the extent of his/her familiarity with the topic to be searched? How much and in what detail?

3. Do you ever look at written drafts of a patron's proposal or report before searching? If so, do they help?

4. How important is the pre-search interview with the patron? Why? Is it more important to do with the person than over the telephone? Why? What information do you cover in the pre-search interview?

5. Do you prefer searching with or without the patron? Why? Which do you usually do in your searches?

6. What constitutes a good search in your experience? What are the components of a good search? What information do you need from the patron to perform a search properly?

7. When do you discuss money in the search process?

8. Can you describe the search process once you are online, i.e. - what steps you do, what steps the patron does, etc.?

9. What amount of preparation do you do before a search? Is this for database review, topic strategy, or both?

10. Do you notice any difference in the contact that you have with undergraduates and graduate students? With lower-division and upper-division students? Can you describe the difference?

11. What would be your ideal search environment? What components would it have?

12. Can you think of a particularly good search and a particularly bad search that you have done in your experience as a searcher? What factors determined both? For the bad search, how could it have been better? For the good search, what made it better than the average search? Please be specific and consider all possible factors.

Ask if the searcher has any general comments at the end of the interview. Allow time for observations after each open-ended question and after all questions have been asked.

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